

# History and histrionics: staging Nero's reign

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**Qualis artifex pereo!** The Roman emperor Nero seems to have thought of himself as a performer on the world's biggest stage, even when arranging the death of his own mother. Katherine Clarke looks at Tacitus' dramatic account of this episode. Action!

We're all familiar with the flamboyant image of the emperor Nero – turning Christians into torches, fiddling while Rome burned, ending his life with the self-consciously theatrical words 'what an artist dies with me!' The historian Tacitus' depiction of Nero's reign reveals a theatrical masterpiece to embody the interests of the emperor himself, who appears as both theatre-director and actor, and offers a perfect reflection of the system of imperial rule that was itself all about playing roles, make-believe, and appearances replacing reality. Nowhere is this theme more striking than in Tacitus' account of Nero's murderous attempts against his own mother and of his subsequent return to the imperial capital.

## The Tragedy of Agrippina: Act I

Nero's decision to try to kill his mother, Agrippina, unleashes a narrative in book 14 of Tacitus' *Annals* that is strongly theatrical, culminating in the farcical idea of sending her off in a collapsible boat. Even the location for Agrippina's boat trip, the Bay of Baiae, resembles a stage set, part of the magnificent sweep of the Bay of Naples with Vesuvius looming dramatically over. The mountains form the curved backdrop to the drama that will take place in the bay itself. In addition to the stage, there are props: the specially constructed, collapsing boat is described as being like a stage contraption (*machinamentum*). Special effects are there even in the weather. Tacitus says that 'the gods provide a night lit by the stars and peaceful with a calm sea, as if to expose the crime'; but the serenity of the night also provides perfect contrast to the chaos and destruction that is to come – it's perhaps more cinematic than theatrical, but the element of suspense as we wait for the calm to be broken does contribute to the staginess of the occasion.

When the moment for the boat to

collapse finally arrives, in the chaos Acerronia (one of Agrippina's household) takes on the role of Agrippina, expecting that this will save her life, little knowing that it guarantees someone will instantly hit her on the head and finish her off. Pretending to be someone else, acting a role, in this particular drama, can have unpleasant consequences. This drama is clearly not a theatrical performance, but the real life of Nero and Agrippina, and we'll see later that Tacitus might be encouraging us to see not just this episode or these people but the whole Principate as something of a stage-show, a reality that is at the same time a performance, self-consciously theatrical and stagey in the extreme.

As soon as Agrippina realizes that all of this is a plot to kill her, she herself takes on the role of actress. She decides to pretend that what happened was really an accident, though she knows it was only 'staged' to look like that. The language of Agrippina is that of pretence and make-believe: she 'made a pretence of showing no concern' (*securitate simulata*) about her wounds; only the search for Acerronia's will and sealing up of her possessions was done 'without pretence' (*non per simulationem*).

## Nero, director of the play

If Agrippina's tragedy is set up as a stage-show, with Agrippina playing the leading, though not the only, role, Nero himself has so far been watching from the director's box as the plot fails to unfold as he planned. But even now, fearing that Agrippina is on her way to confront him, he is not yet ready to take his own place on stage, instead accepting the offer of Anicetus, his freedman, to finish Agrippina off. Nero's director-role is then made explicit as he 'stages an accusation' (*scaenam ultro criminis parat*), making it

look as though Agrippina's messenger, Agerinus, has been sent to kill *him*. Nero here indulges in a bit of impromptu re-casting. Now Agrippina will be the plotter and Agerinus the hopeful executioner, Nero the victim; a complete role-reversal of the reality that we've just seen being performed. So we now have at least two plots on the stage of Tacitus' narrative – one real, and the other fictional – both highly charged dramas under the direction of Nero himself.

## The Tragedy of Agrippina: Final Act

Meanwhile, the spotlight returns to Agrippina and the scene of her attempted murder. That magnificent location of the Bay of Baiae set against its theatrical mountain backdrop now provides the setting for another spectacle as the news spreads and people rush to the shore and even into the water. Tacitus' description of this crowd-scene is vivid and very cinematic: 'Some mounted the embankments and breakwaters, others the nearest boats; others waded into the sea as far as their height allowed; some stretched out their hands; the whole shore was filled with laments, prayers, and the shouting of men asking various questions and of others giving uncertain answers; a huge crowd poured down with torches, and when it became known that she was safe, they got ready to congratulate her, until they were scattered by the sight of an armed and threatening column of men'. But the performance of the anonymous crowd is about to be cast into the shade by Agrippina's final appearance on the stage, at least in life. As her assassins attack her with a club and sword, she melodramatically offers her stomach to take the final blow, in obvious reference to the womb which bore her murderous son.

Even after death, Agrippina is still a spectacle – just as her son couldn't take his eyes off her as she went to her death, so he thought, in the collapsible boat, so too once she is well and truly dead some say that, 'Nero looked upon his dead mother and praised the beauty of her body'. Nero has his eyes fixed, rather perversely we might say, on the result of his labours.

## Nero takes the stage

So far Nero has been a spectator and a director of the unfolding drama, and has gently warmed up his acting skills with the 'fake victim' scene, but he is now ready to take centre-stage. The reaction of the centurions and tribunes to Nero after Agrippina's death buys into Nero's fictitious version of events. They congratulate him for surviving Agrippina's plot against him – in itself an indication that pretence and acting are still going to dominate. Two pretences are identified in the very next sentence – Nero's friends pretend to be delighted at Agrippina's death, while Nero himself 'with the opposite pretence' (*diversa simulatione*) was sad. A complete role reversal: we have already seen Nero excelling in those before, recasting the characters in his play; but now he's one of the players too and a very good actor he proves to be. The one element in the drama that Nero cannot stage-manage is the scenery itself – the one real rather than artificial part of this whole theatrical spectacle, and therefore 'since the appearance of places cannot be changed in the same way as the expressions of people, and the view of that sea and coastline offered an oppressive sight... he withdrew to Naples and sent a letter to the senate.'

Nero's return to Rome offers full scope to his skill in stage-management and his own acting prowess. Yet again, the narrative is heavily theatrical, all carefully staged with the audience arranged along the route: 'tribes coming out to meet him, the senate in festive attire (even costumes here), columns of wives and children arranged by gender and age, tiers of seats (just like a theatre) constructed along the route he was to travel, after the fashion in which triumphs are viewed'. Nero acts his role perfectly – a new role as victorious general returning to his grateful people. And the people of Rome play their part in this fiction too, acting the audience to a completely sham triumph. The scene is all the more resonant, since Nero was notoriously not a military emperor, providing Tacitus with great battles to describe. He would never have anything other than a fictitious triumph. As we've seen, Nero's strength is not in war, but in amateur dramatics, and this passion now takes over.

As Tacitus laments, 'he had a long-standing desire to drive a four-horse chariot and a no less despicable passion to sing to the lyre as a theatrical performer'. Tacitus describes in detail the escalation of Nero's thespian interests, until 'finally the man himself went on the stage' to sing and play the lyre. If all this sounds like harmless fun, it's worth remembering the deep-seated disgust at the idea of upper-class Romans becoming a public spectacle – there were actually laws against it –

so Nero is getting it horribly wrong here as the metaphor of a theatrical reign merges into the reality of theatrical shows. It is not just *like* a drama; now it literally *is* a drama, and Tacitus is so appalled that he compromises his own role as historian and conceals the names of noble Romans forced into these acting displays.

## The theatre of opposition

The theatricality of Nero's reign continues as he presides over dinner parties on floating rafts, creates his own stage-sets by digging fake canals, cutting through mountains, and refashioning Rome as a theme-park, and was even rumoured in the midst of the great fire at Rome to have 'mounted the stage in his house and sung the destruction of Troy'.

But Nero is not the only player in the subsequent narrative. The later books of the *Annals* are punctuated by the stagey suicides of opponents and victims of the emperor. Have they been infected by the theatricality of their emperor? Or is this the only way to gain a place in the annals of history? Tacitus presents a sequence of flamboyant death-scenes perfectly suited to the individuals concerned. That of Petronius, the comic writer and member of Nero's court, is almost farcical, with Petronius listening as he died to light poetry and playful verses, rather than the customary philosophical treatises, and enjoying a dinner party with his friends. Still more dramatic and self-conscious is the suicide of the notorious senatorial opponent of the emperor, Thrasea Paetus. Wandering round the garden with Demetrius the Cynic, he pours a libation of his life-blood to Jupiter the Liberator. By fate or fluke, this dramatic, stagey, self-conscious death forms the extraordinarily dramatic end to the *Annals* as we have it. This is where the incomplete text of Tacitus runs out, making Thrasea's death even more dramatic for the modern reader than it already was for the original audience.

## Nero, perfectly suited to the role of *princeps*

In fact, it seems likely from the structure of the whole work and of each emperor's narrative that the *Annals* ended with the death or suicide of Nero himself. Judging by what we've seen, it is likely to have been the biggest, showiest, most ostentatious, extraordinary final act of them all. Nero had, as Tacitus presents him, trodden a fine line between staging or acting in the metaphorical dramas of his reign, including the murder of his own mother, and acting on the real stage.

But this makes Nero the perfect embodiment of the Julio-Claudian Principate that Tacitus sets out to examine in his *Annals*. Nero's famous last words 'what an artist

dies in me' (*qualis artifex pereo*) could easily refer to his predecessors too. It was clear to Tacitus that from the very start the Principate was a sham, a performance. Restoring the Republic was a façade for restoring the kingship at Rome; emperors pretended to be ordinary magistrates but really held tyrannical and autocratic power. It was all a gross deception, an act. The rot set in with Augustus, bribing and deceiving his way to power under the guise or at least the terminology of the restored Republic. Tiberius' reign was characterized by pretence (*dissimulatio* – the buzzword of this part of Tacitus' account). Tacitus' account of Caligula's reign is lost, but it seems likely that he would have lapped up this emperor's theatricality – Gaius dressed up as the Persian king and raced on horseback on a bridge of boats across the Bay of Baiae, whose dramatic potential we've already seen as a venue for Agrippina's death. All of these imperial reigns set the scene for Nero's act – the showiest life and death of them all. Nero simply offers the culmination of Julio-Claudian theatricality, but maybe he takes it too far. When politics itself is one big drama, who needs to go on the stage?

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